

The Great Tom Collins Hoax.

By George Sinclair.

One of the great test questions that one bartender can ask another is "What is the difference between a Tom Collins and a Gin Fizz?". The answer that the inquirer expects is usually that the Tom Collins is built over ice in a Collins Glass, and that the Gin Fizz is shaken, and then strained in an empty glass, whereupon the glass is filled with soda water. However, nothing could be further from the truth, in fact the Gin's Fizz is supplied by the addition of "Fizzy" water (i.e. carbonated soda water). You see, the Gin Fizz is a much older concoction than the Collins, dating back to the first appearance of carbonated water.

The Tom Collins is from a specific year and named after a specific event, with the event in question being the Great Tom Collins Hoax of 1874.

Gettysburg Compiler (1874)

"Have you seen Tom Collins"

"If you haven't, perhaps you had better do so, and as quick as you can, for he is talking about you in a very rough manner--calling you hard names, and altogether saying things about you that are rather calculated to induce people to believe there is nothing you wouldn't steal short of a red-hot stove. Other little things of that nature he is openly speaking in public places, and as a friend--although of course we don't wish to make you feel uncomfortable--we think you ought to take some notice of them and of Mr. Tom Collins. This is about the cheerful substance of a very successful practical joke which has been going the rounds of the city in the past week. It is not to this manor born, but belongs to New York, where it was played with immense success to crowded houses until it played out."

Steubenville Daily Herald (1874)

"Frantic young men rushed wildly through the streets of the city on Saturday hunting the libelous Tom Collins."

There are many other examples of people and newspaper journalists helping to

propagate the Tom Collins Hoax, by printing false sightings and the like. The hoax gained such notoriety that it was used as the subject of music hall songs, one such being "Tom Collins: Or, I've been led astray," penned by W. D. Fountain (1874).

The first occurrence of the Tom Collins Recipe dates to the 1876 edition of Jerry Thomas' "The Bartenders Guide". Thomas listed 3 drinks called Tom Collins, the Tom Collins Whiskey, Tom Collins Brandy and, last but not least, the Tom Collins Gin.

Tom Collins Gin, Jerry Thomas (1876).

(Use small bar-glass.)

Take 5 or 6 dashes of gum syrup.

Juice of a small lemon.

1 large wine-glass of Gin.

2 or 3 lumps of ice;

Shake up well and strain into a large bar-glass. Fill up the glass with plain soda water and imbibe while it is lively.

The preparation for the Tom Collins is that of being shaken with ice and then being topped with soda water. The Gin Fizz, or Fiz as it was also called, was built in a glass, with or without ice, and then "fizzed" with carbonated water. If you wish to recreate a Silver Fizz, by adding egg-white (albumen), or a Golden Fizz, by adding egg-yolk, then you really will have to shake the ingredients beforehand.

Gin Fizz, Jerry Thomas (1862)

(Use medium bar-glass.)

Take 1 tea-spoonful of powdered white sugar.

3 dashes of Fresh Lemon Juice.

1 wine-glass of Holland Gin

1 small piece of Ice.

Fill up the glass with Apollinaris or Seltzer water, stir thoroughly and serve.

Notice that the Gin Fizz recipe uses Holland Gin, which refers to Dutch Gin, or Jenever as it is now known. It is a fact that in the 1800s, Hollands Gin (Jenever) was imported into the United States at a ratio of approximately 6 litres to every litre of English London Dry Gin. Also notice that the Gin Fizz is

basically a Gin and Sodawater with a little bit of lemon juice, whereas the Tom Collins contains considerably more lemon juice, basically rendering it as a Gin and Sparkling Lemonade.

Moving on, we find ourselves contemplating the significance of the so-called "John Collins Limerick", which goes as follows:

'My name is John Collins,
head waiter at Limmer's,
Corner of Conduit Street,
Hanover Square,
My chief occupation is filling
brimmers
For all the young gentlemen
frequenters there.'

The above rhyme is cited by the International Bartenders Association (IBA) as being the proof that the John Collins drink preceded the Tom Collins and was also created in London, England. But where did this limerick come from? According to the IBA it was printed in a 1892 tome called "Drinks of the World", which contemporary newspaper sources at the time referred to as "a quaint compilation". The 1892 book compiled the limerick from a "discursive paper, pleasantly written by Sir MORELL MACKENZIE, M.D., ", written in mid-1891, and which was subsequently refuted in the next published issue of Punch magazine (Punch, Or The London Charivari, Vol. 101, August 8, 1891). Apparently the good doctor, royal physician to be exact, mistranslated the song of "Jim Collins", his reason, according to the Punch correspondent, was to prove a link between the song and the creation of the drink, which did not, in all actuality, exist.

"My name is JIM COLLINS,
'Ead-vaiteer at Limmers',
The corner of Conduck Street,
'Anover Square.
"And my hokkipashun
Is sarvin' out liquors
To such sportin' covies
As chance to come there."

Not only, it seems, is the oft-quoted "John Collins Limerick" an incorrectly certified "fact", but it doesn't mention any specific drink in either transcription as being created by the head-waiter, Jim or John. So what were the "covies" of

Limmer's Hotel quaffing? Why the "famous Gin Punch" of course. While Gin Punch is similar to a Gin Sling, in that it uses gin, lemon juice, sugar and water, it is not similar enough to a Tom Collins, or John Collins, to be called such. The fact is that no drink other than a Gin Punch has been associated with Limmers, it seems that the idea of a drink known as "John Collins" predating the "Tom Collins" is totally down to the fantastical thinking of one man; Sir Morell MacKenzie, in 1891.

The final question that remains to be answered is whether the Tom Collins was named for its use of Old Tom Gin. The early recipes for the Tom Collins make no mention of Old Tom Gin, with the earliest recipe making no mention of Gin either. Remember that the first recorded Tom Collins recipe is from the second edition of Jerry Thomas' book, published in 1876, in which the Tom Collins is a class of drink, with the type of alcoholic spirit being used specified after the name Tom Collins (i.e. "-brandy", "-whiskey", "-gin"). It is others, who came after Thomas, that changed the Tom Collins into a purely Gin drink.